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ABSTRACT

This document consists of four issues of a quarterly newsletter for educators at the middle school level. Each issue focuses on one major topic, and includes a column by an ACEI Executive Board vice president on varying topics. The Fall 2000 issue focuses on a community-wide collaborative model for service and program delivery for at-risk middle level students. The vice president's column addresses ways to integrate the Internet into the middle level curriculum. The Winter 2000 issue focuses on homework and discusses its benefits, provides a list of do's and don'ts for teachers, presents a planning guide for homework reading assignments, and offers tips for parents. The vice president's column discusses ways to explore science and mathematics at an amusement park. The Spring 2001 issue discusses ways to build a culture of high standards in middle grades. The vice president's column describes a social curriculum to address problems in the cafeteria. The Summer 2001 issue addresses standards, standardization, and student engagement. The vice president's column suggests ways educators can provide communication guidelines for busy parents of early adolescents. (KB)

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Focus on Middle School (Ages 11-13): A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community, 2000-2001.

Daniel L. Kain, Editor

Volume 13, Numbers 1-4

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ACEI

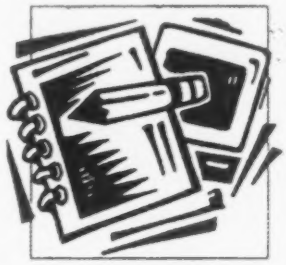
Fall 2000 • Vol. 13, No. 1

Focus on Middle School ages 11-13

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

Theme

Editor's Note:
In too many cases, the pressure to achieve high standards—and the accompanying accountability tests—has suggested only one response in



schools: more traditional instruction, especially for "at-risk" youth. In this descriptive piece, the Littles show us how an enriched environment with strong connections to the community can lead to greater success for these students.

—D.L.K.

Camp JFK:

A Community-Wide Collaborative Model for the Delivery of Programs and Services for At-Risk Middle Level Students

Augustus L. "Skip" Little and Suzanne F. Little

Augustus L. "Skip" Little is an Associate Professor of Middle Level and Elementary Education at Northern Arizona University at Yuma and Founder of Camp JFK. Suzanne F. Little is a former Middle School Counselor and is currently a Doctoral Student in School Psychology at Northern Arizona University.

When students experience failure in school, their emotions and self-esteem levels are dramatically affected. Consistent failure in school sets the stage for a debilitatingly negative self-image and an overall sense of ineffectiveness. Students who experience this have little hope of improvement in the future and foresee little or no potential and choice. Failure in school establishes a sense of self-defeatism that may never be overcome (Warkentin & Rea, 1996).

School failure also has implications for society at large. Typically, students who experience failure in school are less likely to become informed and contributing members of a democratic society. Such participation demands informed thinking and intelligent decision-making by its citizens. Those skills generally have been lacking in students who drop out of school or who experience repeated academic failure while in school (Warkentin & Rea, 1996).

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The consequences of school failure can lead to a spiral-effect cycle of failure. Particular subgroups find themselves stuck in this downward spiral, and no one seems to know how to break it. It is particularly discouraging that education, which has the potential to be an agent of social equality and opportunity for all, continues to sustain this cycle of failure, especially for minority children. Rather than perpetuating this inequality among different social groups, middle level schools have attempted to provide a way for all individuals to achieve (Warkentin & Rea, 1996).

The Middle School Student At Risk of Failure

The at-risk middle school student is a special challenge, given the added stresses of adolescence. At-risk middle school students not only face the normal challenges of adolescent physical, social, and emotional development, but also exhibit a wide range of educational problems. Some of these include the failure to respond positively to instruction offered in basic academic skills, the manifestation of unacceptable behavior in school, the inability to keep up with classmates in academic subjects, and a limited background for formal education (Pierce, 1994).

Camp JFK: The Beginning

An exemplary model of one middle school's response to the needs of its at-risk students was the Camp JFK Program at Fort Clarke Middle School, in Gainesville, Florida. Through cooperation with the Kennedy Homes Housing Authority, this school's experience provides a model for other partnerships between middle schools and their communities.

Kennedy Homes, a federally subsidized housing project of 264 apartments in Gainesville, reported one of the highest rates of drug and weapon arrests, as well as of alcohol and spouse abuse, in the community. Not surprisingly, the children of this community had consistently received the highest percentage of discipline referrals of any segment of the population enrolled at Fort Clarke Middle School. The children from Kennedy Homes demonstrated needs in many areas, including academics, appropriate behavior, and self-esteem.

School counselors and deans reported that they believed the repeated demonstrations of anger, hostility, physical aggression, and noninvolvement by these students could be ameliorated by improvements in their self-esteem.

In the summer of 1992, Fort Clarke Middle School established a summer enrichment/tutorial program as a community outreach project for at-risk students who resided in Kennedy Homes. The children were considered at-risk based on the fact that while only 22 percent of the 1,142 students who attended Fort Clarke received free or reduced-fee meals, 91 percent of the Kennedy Homes students were participants in the program. Also, these students had received disciplinary referrals at a rate far greater than the general student population (averaging three per semester in the fall of 1992). Thirty-five percent of those referrals resulted in suspensions and 51 percent

were due to defiance and/or failure to obey rules. Furthermore, the majority of the Kennedy Homes students earned grade-point averages of less than 1.5 on a 4.0 scale. School counselors and deans reported that they believed the repeated demonstrations of anger, hostility, physical aggression, and noninvolvement by these students could be ameliorated by improvements in their self-esteem.

The on-site endeavor became known as Camp JFK. The camp was housed in a three-bedroom apartment in Kennedy Homes donated by the housing authority. A small grant helped fund the summer salaries of a Fort Clarke teacher and counselor. Major support came from collaborating community institutions, agencies, civic groups, and the Kennedy Homes housing project.

Community Involvement

More than 20 community agencies contributed to the programs. Some of those participants included the Gainesville Police Department, the Alachua County Sheriff's Office, Corner Drug Store, Gainesville Garden Club, Businesses in Partnership with Education, Harn Museum of Art, Alachua General Hospital, Santa Fe Regional Library, Olive Garden Restaurant, Domino's Pizza, the Gainesville Chapter of the Sierra Club, Browning-Ferris Industries (Recycling Division), Shands' Teaching Hospital (neonatal unit), the Alachua County Extension Service, and the North Central Florida Chapter of the March of Dimes.

The primary goal of the camp during the first year was to develop students' self-concept, health awareness, spirit of volunteerism, and academic skills. Pre- and post-assessments demonstrated that participating in various community service projects increased students' self-esteem. The camp also provided tutoring for the students the first year and each subsequent year.

The tutoring focused on assisting students in proactive behaviors such as goal setting, an important skill for at-risk learners. Low achievers need help in setting realistic goals for the future. A useful technique in this case was task analysis; the students had experienced more success when the task was broken down into small steps that were easily attainable. In the end, the students performed the desired task and were more confident due to multiple successes. Rather than shooting for the stars and failing, the students aimed to get off the ground and experienced the success of a small, positive step in the right direction (Little & Little, 1998).

The schedule for the first summer demonstrates the camp's structure. On Monday, the students received instruction on food preparation, nutrition, and comparative shopping. On Wednesday, the students visited a local supermarket and shopped to buy ingredients for meals they would cook and deliver on Thursdays. On Thursdays, the meals the students prepared went to elderly shut-ins in the housing project. The community was the students' laboratory, and each Friday they ventured out on exciting field trips. The local YMCA provided transportation, and community agencies or other groups hosted each of the trips. For example, the local March of Dimes hosted a day at Shands' Teaching Hospital. During the day, the students saw presentations by various health professionals, who discussed their jobs and career goals with the students. The physicians provided a nutritious lunch of fresh fruit, cheese crackers, and apple juice. After lunch, the staff took the students on a VIP tour of the hospital, which included a special tour of the neonatal unit. This led to a discussion of substance abuse during pregnancy.

The activities of the camp were reported regularly in both the local and the state media. That coverage culminated when the local television station did a special report on the camp and its participants. The news program named the students Wednesday's Heroes, for the work they were doing to improve their community (in addition to delivering meals, the students started a neighborhood recycling program and a community beautification project). The last activity of the summer was a banquet held for the students and their families at a local restaurant.

Through the first summer, the students became more self-confident, understanding of others, and responsible for their own actions. The positive outcomes that came about due to these efforts inspired the staff to continue with the program.

The academic growth and the reduction of disciplinary problems demonstrated by these students amazed observers. The students were identified as an ongoing group who continued to receive community recognition and support. That

The success of the first year's experience encouraged the Fort Clarke personnel and the collaborative agencies to continue and expand their efforts to meet the needs of these targeted students.

first Christmas they were adopted by a sorority at the University of Florida and treated to a special Christmas party. Each student received personal gifts and the opportunity to interact with the college students. Also, the Camp JFK students were special guests at the Adolescent Health Care Conference at the University of Florida.

Camp JFK: Year Two

The success of the first year's experience encouraged the Fort Clarke personnel and the collaborative agencies to continue and expand their efforts to meet the needs of these targeted students. A major link was formed between the staff of Camp JFK and the North Central Florida Chapter March of Dimes Chain Reaction Youth Leadership Council. Chain Reaction is a youth leadership development program created by the March of Dimes to promote more healthful lifestyles. Members are high school students who have been nominated by their individual schools and selected by a March of Dimes committee.

Chain Reaction officially took on Camp JFK as its major community service project and assumed a significant role in the planning and delivery of Camp JFK activities. The 36 local Chain Reaction volunteers, representing public and private high schools from throughout the community, were required to participate in three activities: an all-day health conference; the March of Dimes Walk America 10-mile fundraiser; and a service project—Camp JFK.

Chain Reaction members acted as facilitative leaders for the 1993-1995 summer programs. They participated with Camp JFK members in field trips to hospitals, the neonatal unit, community businesses, overnight camping trips, daily educational and recreational activities, a ropes challenge course, and individual mentoring. Chain Reaction members continued to volunteer during the academic year by staffing Saturday camps (educational tutoring), Family Retreats for students and parents, and by communicating regularly with their JFK buddies through correspondence, phone calls, trips to the movies, and many other activities.

Throughout the academic year, the students met on alternating Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to noon. Members of Chain Reaction and one teacher and one counselor from Fort Clarke Middle School were on-site at the Kennedy Homes apartment. Chain Reaction members provided tutoring to Fort Clarke Middle School students. Chain Reaction

members also helped deliver the on-site volunteer service activities, including reading to young children, recycling, doing laundry, landscaping, and maintaining the grounds at Kennedy Homes. The Fort Clarke teacher and counselor supervised activities and were also available to meet with parents to provide family counseling and help families acquire assistance from local human service agencies.

Retreats were designed for students who attended Summer Camp JFK and their parents/guardians. Project staff and Chain Reaction members developed and presented workshops for the participants in day-long retreats. Workshops dealt with family management problems, parental attitudes, antisocial behaviors, and drug and alcohol abuse. Attendees and presenters also participated in a variety of physical activities, geared to build team skills and a sense of trust and community.

Camp JFK also helped to establish home-school relationships with the students' parents. The school had been unable to reach many of these parents; after the program's inception, however, the parents were more interested and willing to participate in their children's schooling.

Project Evaluation

After two years of operation, the investigators were able to review longitudinal data measuring the effects of the camp on its student participants and the overall student population of Kennedy Homes. Specifically, in the 1992-93 school year, only 24 percent of the total Camp JFK students were referred to the administration, compared with 70 percent of the non-camper Kennedy Home students. Referrals per student were 160 percent greater for the non-camping Kennedy Homes students than for campers. In the 1993-94 school year, only 23 percent of the Camp JFK students received referrals while 43 percent of the non-campers were referred. Also, the referrals per non-camper were 75 percent greater than for the campers.

It is important to note the nature of non-campers' referrals. Non-campers were disciplined for battery, fighting, defiance, and weapon possession. The decrease in campers' referrals indicates the positive effect the camp had on the children's ability to make positive choices and develop a sense of self-control and control of their own destinies. This control was nurtured and developed at the camp to help the children make positive life choices regarding alcohol, drugs, weapons, and sex.

The camp's community outreach efforts began during the second year. Chain Reaction volunteers assisted the participating Fort Clarke Middle School students in developing and distributing educational materials to high-risk youths.

The camp's community outreach efforts began during the second year. Chain Reaction volunteers assisted the participating Fort Clarke Middle School students in developing and distributing educational materials to high-risk youths throughout the community. This was done by hosting a booth at the Eastside High School's Annual Health Fair. Students established a booth to distribute anti-drug and alcohol information at the fair, potentially

reaching 1,500 students. The students also hosted a booth at the March of Dimes Health Fair on the University of Florida campus. Another project that the students participated in was establishing one of the 15 checkpoint booths for the annual March of Dimes Walk America. The students developed a theme booth and distributed materials to each of the 40,000 walkers as they arrived at one of the official checkpoints where walkers are required to have their route card stamped.

According to academic records for 1993-94 school year, non-campers earned mostly Ds and Fs in academic classes; however, JFK campers received mostly passing grades. This trend may point to a solution to the prior 79 percent dropout rate among students from Kennedy Homes. JFK campers were consistently commended by outside agencies for their behavior and neat dress. The students were exposed to a variety of situations in the community and throughout the state, and they maintained appropriate demeanor throughout the trips. A Walt Disney World administrator commented that the campers were one of the best youth groups to visit that theme park. Also, the management company for Kennedy homes acknowledged the behavior difference in the students and in the apartment complex since the beginning of the camp.

Camp JFK: Year Three

The third summer of the camp's operation proved to be the most exciting in the camp's history. Upon the completion of the second year, the staff wanted to give the students a summer trip similar to the trips they had taken with their own children—camping cross-country to the Grand Canyon! The four Fort Clarke Camp JFK volunteer staff members immediately began laying the foundation for a Grand Canyon trip.

The group formally linked up with the North Central Florida Chapter of the March of Dimes to act as fiscal agent and trip coordinator. This alleviated legal and fiscal liabilities and allowed all donations made to the trip to become tax deductible donations to the March of Dimes. Chain Reaction became the official cosponsor of the trip, and the Chain Reaction members assumed primary responsibility in planning the day-by-day itinerary of the trip with the JFK campers.

The adult volunteers then mobilized a fundraising drive, using a brochure that was printed as a donation by a local printing company. The single-page, tri-fold brochure gave a history of the camp, an overview of the trip and its purpose, and a solicitation for donations of needed articles (cameras, T-shirts, sneakers, etc.) and money. The volunteer staff solicited donations from individuals and corporations. The resulting support proved that Camp JFK was a comprehensive, collaborative community effort to achieve a dream for the community's children.

Lessons Learned

The staff overcame all the excuses and roadblocks that appeared in their path. Such obstacles included insurance liabilities, financial limitations, political pressures, and limitations of time and energy. The campers' parents became much more involved in their students' schoolwork and were, for the first time, communicating with the school counselors and teachers. Students worked harder in school and began to see that realistic goals were achievable.

To summarize, Camp JFK was a low-maintenance, volunteer-run, collaborative, community-wide program that, once set in place, ran smoothly. The camp encouraged the youngsters to make the right choices on their own, and they eventually no longer required daily follow-up by school counselors, assistant principals, or teachers. It was a program that gave hope where there was no hope and gave dreams to students, many of whom had no dreams. The Grand Canyon trip proved that a middle school can make its at-risk students' dreams come true!

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integrating the internet into the curriculum

Realistically, today's teacher candidates will need to be continuously immersed in technology in order to remain on the cutting edge of technological advances for their students. How can that be possible? The pool of tomorrow's teachers includes not only teacher candidates, but also their cooperating teachers for student teaching experiences and their college methodology and content professors. This powerful group of educators can work together to infuse technology into the curriculum, thus providing rich opportunities that may enhance learning for our children.

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania has implemented a project that continuously immerses teachers in technology. It is know as The Technology Infusion in Teacher Education Model, and is implemented by Audiovisual Communications Technology (AVCT) faculty and led by David Peterson. During the spring and summer 2000 semesters, teacher candidates and their instructors were collegially involved in a variety of instructional and professional development activities. AVCT faculty served as technology collaborators/facilitators for triads of workshop participants consisting of professional education faculty, inservice teachers, and teacher candidates.

One group in the summer course included a 3rd-grade teacher and a children's literature/reading professor. One of the teacher candidates, Kevin, had completed two undergraduate courses related to audiovisual communication technology. The inservice teacher and college professor, by contrast, despite their many years of teaching experience, had no significant formal training in the use of such technology. Their goal was to develop a product that would involve 9-year-old students in the process of using the Internet as a resource to supplement their science/social studies curriculum. As a result of working together, both the inservice teacher and college professor increased their knowledge of technology, and the teacher candidate increased his knowledge of pedagogy. No one member of the group had all the answers; consequently, each member of the group felt successful.

How can 9-year-olds use the Internet effectively during school hours when their school is in the beginning stages of hardware acquisition? To help define parameters for Web site searches in group projects, Kevin's team compiled a Web Walk-about. They related it to a future study unit on marsupials, and tied it in to the Olympic Games in Sydney, which would be underway when the school year began. The group used a software program called Adobe PageMill to com-pose "Web Walkabout: Koala Lou, Where are you?" State and national standards for technology education and reading and writing provided additional focal points. The group described the walkabout in lesson plan format and provided demonstrations via a Power Point presentation.

The Web Walkabout might be introduced with a shared reading of *Koala Lou*, written by Mem Fox. Then the students would be given backpack journals that they take to their computer workstations. There, they will learn the process of using the Internet to gain information about marsupials by completing the walkabout. They can answer questions given on the walkabout microcomputer screen by clicking on links to Web sites. Kevin's group decided that hyper-links to Web sites would be more developmentally appropriate for 9-year-olds at this time than the long URLs, or Web site addresses. After students become adept at visiting sites, they can learn how to discover additional sites within curricular guidelines, with appropriate supervision. Once they complete their walkabouts, they will transfer that information into their journals. Finally, they will give short reports as part of a classroom group.

The potential power inherent within this collaboration is clear. Technology changes rapidly, always making way for further advances. Taking a class or two is not enough to promote technology integration into the curriculum. Being on the cutting edge of the learning curve in the use of technology within the curriculum means that teachers need to immerse themselves in technology so that they will be able to provide appropriate learning opportunities for their students.

Readers may gain more information by contacting David Peterson, Dept. Chair AVCT, Kutztown University of PA, 19530; E-mail: peterson@kutztown.edu; or visiting www.kutztown.edu/acad/coe/avct/projects/infusion/workshops2000/index.htm.

Please share your comments, questions, and ideas about integrating the Internet into the curriculum with me at burnett@kutztown.edu. I look forward to hearing from you and will try to follow up on your suggestions.

—Jeanie Burnett, Vice President Representing Intermediate/Middle Childhood

Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Middle School* is encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication that focus on young adolescents and effective middle level school practices. Topics may include young adolescent development and developmentally appropriate educational practice; descriptions of materials and programs; suggestions for implementing middle school concepts, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, and exploratory programs; issues affecting young adolescents; and challenges facing at-risk populations.

Prospective authors wanting to discuss ideas and suggestions for manuscripts should contact the *Focus on Middle School* Editor:

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Winter 2000 • Vol. 13, No. 2

Focus on Middle School ages 11-13

A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

Benefits of Homework

- Provides a chance for review and reflection about classroom learning
- Organizes a system for working and learning
- Helps students develop self-discipline
- Allows students to work at their own pace
- Provides extra language practice for second-language learners
- Involves students with material at a deeper level than in class
- Gives students a chance to practice effective study skills
- Promotes inquisitiveness
- Increases parents' appreciation of and involvement in schooling
- Allows parents to demonstrate interest in academic program
- Affects class tests and grades positively
- Extends class learning
- Encourages creative responses
- Allows students to catch up

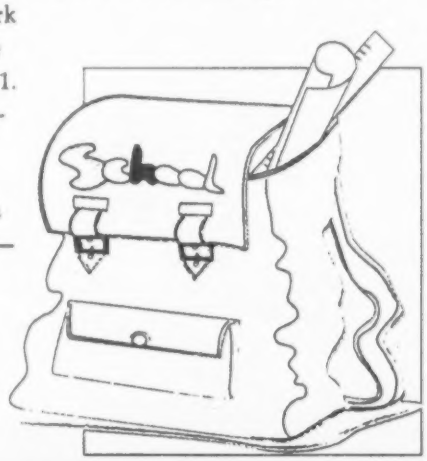
(Compiled from Cooper, 1989; Papendreau, 1991; Schaefer & DiGeronimo, 1990)

Figure 1

Creating Effective Homework: A Teacher Habit of Mind

Michael Tanner, Ed.D.,
Pacific University, Eugene, Oregon

Middle school teachers are in cutthroat competition with each other to win the battle of 3:05 p.m., or whatever time their school day ends. This is the time when students reach into their lockers or backpacks and decide what to take with them as "homework." Since hardcover texts weigh an average of 8 to 10 pounds, and the average 7th-grader weighs about 90 pounds, it does not take many books to stoop over even the most ardent preteen. At 3:05, I want students to put my homework first, so I want to create valuable assignments. If designed well, homework can provide many of the benefits listed in Figure 1.



Homework gives teachers a chance to extend learning time—to get inside the learners' heads and guide their thinking—even when they are not physically present. Instead of only the 20-40 minutes of time on task orchestrated in class, teachers can

capture students' attention, inspire effort, and pique imaginations for another half hour or more outside of class!

After an extensive review of the professional literature, including over 100 empirical studies, Cooper (1989) concluded that homework does not begin to have positive effects on achievement until the junior high school years, and that its academic benefits double when students reach high school.

What a tool for learning homework can be if we master how to use it! As educators, we have to harness or fight the lure of electronic media for student interest and time. Think about what home computers, improved electronic games, and access to the Internet will do to this already stiff competition! Completing reading assignments at home does not seem to have much of a chance. There are other ways to think through and organize a homework assignment, however. Creating, assigning, and then using the results of homework is becoming a lost, but recoverable, art form that can be a valuable part of a teacher's methodology repertoire.

Over the last 25 years, experts have identified practices to follow and practices to avoid for making effective homework assignments. When planning homework for maximum impact on student learning, consider the *do's* and *don'ts* presented in Figure 2.

The recommendations in this list may surprise you, as some surprised me. The list does add up to a warning: Teachers have to plan homework with extreme care if they want students to complete it thoughtfully and consistently. Fortunately, tinkering with your strategies for creating, teaching, and using homework is easy—with the potential for immediate results.

The *Do's* and *Don'ts* of Homework

Do	Don't
Keep it short and frequent	*Give global assignments, such as "Read chapter 3 for tomorrow"*
Keep it focused	*End a unit/lesson with homework*
Provide a "how to" model in class	*Make it voluntary*
Reward completion	*Skip discussing it*
Move students toward self-direction	*Overemphasize homework grades*
Involve parents	*Assign group homework*
Have students use instructional technology	*Assume they have needed resources*
Keep it uniform	*Assume students have research skills*
Set objectives for student learning	*Assume students have access to library, computer, and so on*
State homework policy in syllabus	*Use homework as a punishment*
Clarify make-up policy	*"Reward" gifted students with more homework*
Vary types and purposes	*Use one type of homework too often*
Involve librarian, media person, and others	*Fail to return homework*
Emphasize quality homework, not quantity	*Forget that other teachers give homework, too*
Give clear directions from a student's perspective	*Use homework avoidance vouchers as rewards*
Strive for meaningful, relevant assignments	
Plan homework that extends and integrates skills from class	
Give students the opportunity to redo unsatisfactory work	

(Compiled from Cooper, 1994; Doyle & Barber, 1991; England & Flatley, 1985; Keith, 1986; Shockley, 1964)

Figure 2

Purpose

The first step in planning this component of your curriculum is to consider the purpose of a homework assignment. I have listed purposes for homework in Figure 3. Select a few you would like to aim for in your next assignment.

Purposes for Homework

- Provide writing practice (use vocabulary, mental structures)
- Prepare for class
- Provide for stability/predictability
- Promote involvement
- Encourage discipline/responsibility
- Allow for more coverage
- Apply skills to new situations and real life
- Integrate multiple skills into a single assignment
- Review or practice
- Connect home and school

(Compiled from Curtis & Nourie, 1989; Doyle & Barber, 1991)

Figure 3

Planning Homework

Once you have selected a purpose for your assignment, thinking about this assignment from a number of perspectives will help you create more effective work. Consider the planning guide presented in Figure 4. This guide, like the one provided by Strahan (1998), provides useful steps for thinking through an effective homework idea. Checking off the steps in the homework planning guide's left column enables you to create your homework lesson. The middle column guides your thinking about *purposes* for each step. The right column offers suggestions for *tools and techniques* to build into each step. Most readers do not want, for homework, to read exactly what they just saw in class. Nor do they want to read technical, complex, or archaic language (e.g., Shakespeare, Poe, Dickens), and then have the teacher show them exactly what was meant using a video or CD-ROM. Think about how to use media to rouse curiosity, but not to do all the work for learners; think about how to model language and thinking patterns, but still get students to do most of the work involved in comprehending printed material.

Language cues and how to think with them are the focus for some of the follow-up activities after completion of homework (step 6). The teacher should strive to simultaneously blend content learning with identification of the language skills required to learn and use the knowledge presented. Independent learners—our goal—use available cues to learn when motivated, but also when unmotivated. Cognitive strategies triggered by language cues allow learners to be confident, successful readers even when they have low motivation. A teacher's job is to teach strategies for learning, and homework allows for practice of them. Your homework now has two ends: increasing content knowledge/skills and increasing a student's repertoire of language-processing strategies.

Individualizing Instruction

A survey of homework behavior comparing students with and without learning disabilities identified some particular difficulties that students with learning disabilities have related to homework. It appears that these students experience problems with allocating attention, procrastination, organization, perseverance, managing complex tasks, seeing the importance of homework, and managing materials (Gajria & Salend, 1995). Promising solutions for learning disabled students apply to all students: make homework meaningful, clarify due dates and grading practices, structure assignments with due dates, give immediate feedback on parts of assignments as well as on the final work, and post class calendars.

Cavanaugh (1990) provides detailed structural ideas for the homework process that are specifically aimed at learning disabled students when he describes "academic management systems." His ideas include teaching students "self-monitoring" behaviors. Group and/or individual rewards are created for completion of each part of the assignment. He suggests locker/rest room passes, library passes, free reading vouchers, and preferred seating

Planning Guide for Homework Reading Assignments

1. Select a source worth reading.	Use alternative sources to texts: newspapers, magazines, novels, games, how to . . . (directions).	
2. Conduct a language analysis.	Identify the language cues available within it for conveying meaning, evaluate effectiveness of visuals, examples, metaphors, etc.	Readability formulas are only hints at language appropriateness. Look at how new words are introduced, defined, exemplified, and drilled. Examine visuals for complexity, and labeling, and to see if they are the key concepts.
3. Set purpose for reading.	Tell readers.	Match a purpose or two with the author's intent, as well as your own.
4. Create prereading activities.	Choose what you will model in class to aid students. Decide on anticipatory set. Overview purpose for reading and how to accomplish it. *Teach a strategy they will need to use while reading.* Provide evaluation criteria for the reading guide. If you have a related video or computer program, consider using parts of it to arouse curiosity and questions.	Request, Read Aloud, and QARs are useful activities (Brozo & Simpson, 1995; Wood, Lapp, & Flood, 1992). Show a video segment without sound and have them predict what it's about, or show only some "cool" parts they'll have to read about. Use CD-ROM interactions to raise questions. Extend computer learning with related reading.
5. Create a reading guide.	This should not be *only* literal and perhaps not even start with a literal search for facts. Remember the length recommendation (1/2 hour sitting).	Three level guides, glossing, and KWL are useful ideas for complete formats. Try to go beyond fill-in-the-blank, sentence writing guides. Draw, web, label, or complete visuals instead.
6. Create post activities.	Decide how students will correct it, edit it, and use it in class to learn additional ideas. Decide how you can simultaneously teach content knowledge and processes of learning. Decide on the value: How are you going to reward completion? Additions and corrections to it in class? Allow use of it during subsequent evaluation and assessment activities? Put in student portfolios? Try to avoid *beginning* with questions.	Search for ideas that have students draw, map, act out, write, or use the reading information. If you ask questions, ask higher-level questions to *begin* the recitation. Debrief the reading by identifying metacognitive activities that will cause reflection about successful strategies students used while completing the homework and how they'll approach future assignments (e.g., making a chart of steps for skimming, or learning a new word).
7. Evaluate your plan now using the *Do's* and *Don'ts* list.	See Figure 2 for elements to include and elements to avoid.	Use segments of videos as post activities. Ask *metacognitive questions* about the relatedness of the reading and class activities; make connections to their previous experience.

Figure 4

arrangements as having the greatest reinforcement value. Schumm and Sauwell (1995) conclude that "if inclusion is to be successful, home-school partnerships, frequent monitoring and extra teacher assistance" are crucial components of a solution to homework problems (p. 763). Do not stop giving homework; simply plan it better (Schumm & Sauwell, 1995).

Involving Parents in Homework

Since you are sending work home and you have put all this effort into setting the students up for success, it helps to go one step further by enlisting parental support. Over the last 40 years, homework has gone in and out of favor with parents (Cooper, 1994).

Your first letter home should outline your

Parents and Homework—Helpful Hints

- Have a "homework headquarters" with appropriate space, seating, light, privacy, references, supplies
- Have a specific time allotted; students can select when to work on their assignments
- Have guidelines/rules:
  - No phones
  - No music
  - Homework BEFORE TV and phone calls, and AFTER chores
- Allow enough time for completion and acceptable bedtime
- Help them plan ahead through use of calendars, Post-its, assignment folders, etc.
- Teach students to use time wisely:
  - Do homework between events
  - Do homework while traveling
- Let child take consequences for not getting homework done
- Communicate with teacher(s):
  - Tell amount of time being spent on homework by child
  - Note any enthusiasm or frustrations
  - Ask for suggestions for improvement
- Keep criticism of homework down and praise up
- Discuss homework with child:
  - How does _____ relate to the real world?
  - When do you ask questions about this in class?
  - What conditions would make completing this easier?
  - Encourage further research
- Read student work and ask questions about it, react to it as an audience
- Take student to library, help with resources, references
- Provide snacks and encouragement periodically
- Follow up by asking:
  - How'd you do in class?
  - What did you get on that assignment?
  - Were you happy with the results?
  - Are you accumulating all your work to study?

(Compiled from Canter & Hauser, 1987; Cooper, 1994; Doyle & Barber, 1991; Gaul, 1985; Radencich & Johnson, 1988; Schaefer & DiGeronimo, 1990; Shefelbine, 1991.)

Figure 5

purpose for assigning homework and then offer some homework "danger signs" for parents to watch for, such as students not knowing what the assignments are. Helpful hints for you to provide parents are listed in Figure 5.

Note that these solutions do not require parents to know specific content or to be familiar with the reading. In follow-up phone calls, provide some of these hints to any parents willing to help, and offer specific ideas aimed at getting your homework done to the best of each student's ability. The professional literature still points to high-achieving students coming from supportive homes.

Final Thoughts

Remember that well-designed homework is more likely to be completed; rewarding completion works well with learning disabled and unmotivated learners; short, frequent assignments have the greatest impact on improving test grades; and homework drills have the greatest impact on learning low-level material and skills. On the other hand, routine practice drills are of questionable value and may even be counterproductive (Cooper, 1994). I have advocated teachers' creating and using a variety of reading guides and aggressive pre- and post-classroom strategy modeling activities to guide students' thinking and production during homework. "Homework assignments that students view as motivating and useful promote learning; homework assignments students view as drudgery will not promote learning—they may, in fact, further decrease student interest and lead to cheating" (Doyle & Barber, 1991, p. 20).

Creating homework assignments that extend learning and prompt insight takes practice. The steps for *planning* and the nurturing of *supportive conditions* for completion of homework must become a teacher habit of mind. Make engaging homework assignments a tradition in your classroom, and win the battle of 3:05.

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coaster quest: exploring science and mathematics at an amusement park

Most educators accept the idea that when students are actively engaged in authentic problem-solving situations, their learning is more pleasurable, and perhaps more meaningful, than when they participate in lecture/lab type activities. But discovering and managing such authentic learning situations is no easy task. Educators throughout the United States are turning to collaborations with businesses and universities in their communities to provide stimulating learning environments.

In Pennsylvania, Dorney Park & Wildwater Kingdom Amusement Park, Lehigh Valley regional school districts, and Kutztown University of Pennsylvania are pursuing one such collaboration—Coaster Quest: The Physics and Math of Thrill Rides. Although many people are to be credited for this collaboration, here we will refer to the work of Joseph Elias, Kathleen Dolgos, Deborah Frantz, and Keith Koepke.

The main goal of Coaster Quest is to provide stimulating and challenging exploratory math and science experiences for the whole learning community: students, teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators. In this process, families and the broader community become active participants in their children's education. Approximately 1,800 students participated in Coaster Quest last year. Their fun stood on the shoulders of many dedicated professionals who had planned and refined activities over a two-year period. A core of science and mathematics teachers participated in all stages of development, and the professional staff of Dorney Park extended guidance and technical support to those who developed the laboratories. Academic excellence for the students remained the constant focal point; Coaster Quest was considered a means to teach focused concepts.

In preparation for the event, teachers met at Dorney Park for a workshop/orientation one Saturday several weeks before the event. There, they had an opportunity to tour the park in a non-operational setting with those who helped create the program. With student safety as a major concern, everyone was sure to learn rules of park operation so that they could have a safe and enjoyable day when the big day dawned. "Tips for Teachers" included a list of suggested equipment and supplies to bring to the park, as well as ideas for concept review and data collection strategies. Teachers decided how students from their individual schools would choose rides and problems.

As an offshoot of Coaster Quest, the committee decided to use physics and math applications for a coaster building adventure for regional science and mathematics classes. The K'NEX Corporation donated three tons of model parts. Teachers developed the rules, plans, and guidelines for a pilot program to encourage students to apply their understanding of science and math in good-spirited competitions among the schools. In culmination, the students brought their fabulous coasters to Kutztown University. They were eager to demonstrate their model thrill rides and provide the calculations that showed why these coasters would work well. Whatever the outcome of the contests, all the students learned math and science, as well as persistence and teamwork.

Plans are underway to enhance and update both the theme park and model construction events. This year, Coaster Quest will include math and science for middle school levels. For further information about these events, contact either Kathleen Dolgos, Dept. Chair, Secondary Education; or Joseph Elias, Secondary Education, Kutztown University of PA 19530; E-mail: elias@kutztown.edu.

Please plan to join members of the Intermediate/Middle Childhood Committee in Toronto at the Focus Luncheon on April 4, to learn more about current Coaster Quest plans. We encourage everyone to attend and share good food and clever ideas about making science and mathematics authentic for our learners. I look forward to our meeting in Toronto. Meanwhile, I welcome your comments about this event, or any committee-related insights.

—Jeanie Burnett, Vice President Representing Intermediate/Middle Childhood

Call for Manuscripts

The readership of *Focus on Middle School* is encouraged to submit manuscripts for publication that focus on young adolescents and effective middle level school practices. Topics may include young adolescent development and developmentally appropriate educational practice; descriptions of materials and programs; suggestions for implementing middle school concepts, such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, and exploratory programs; issues affecting young adolescents; and challenges facing at-risk populations.

Prospective authors wanting to discuss ideas and suggestions for manuscripts should contact the *Focus on Middle School* Editor:

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A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

Thinking About Standards

Schools across the United States are busy reaching for higher standards. In fact, even if state legislatures weren't mandating a standards focus, the notion of "reaching for higher standards" is something of a battle cry for educators and those who want to influence education. Indeed, can we imagine anyone calling for schools to back down a little, to lower the standards just a bit? Hardly.

Like most slogans, however, the call for "higher standards" seems so self-supporting that we seldom examine what this call might really mean. Is it possible that the quest for higher standards might damage learning? My concern is based, in part, on what I have recently seen in some middle schools. In the name of reaching higher standards, memorization and drill exercises have replaced exciting learning opportunities that embody the core of what it

continued on page 2 . . .

Building a Culture of High Standards in the Middle Grades

Anne Wheelock

With the spotlight on standards and accountability, middle school educators across the country are scrambling to figure out ways to boost students' test scores. But students require more than a push from external tests in order to produce quality work that meets the standards articulated by the professional associations. First and foremost, students need schools grounded in what Shutesbury, Massachusetts, teacher Ron Berger calls a "culture of high standards": the values, structures, relationships, and "regularities" that shape schools' daily activities for helping all students become successful learners. Establishing such a culture calls for redefining what it means to become smart, and translating that definition into a set of practices that help students feel safe to be smart.

Rethinking Beliefs: What Does It Mean To Be Smart?

In a school culture of high standards, beliefs about being smart complement the view that learning for

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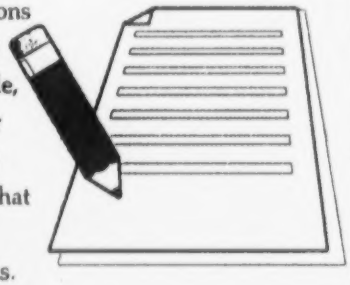
means to reach deep understanding. Instead of empathic, engaged learning through simulations about a historical event, for example, students toil over decontextualized vocabulary lists that might be on the standardized tests. Despite the promise of higher test scores, is this really meeting higher standards?



Of course, part of the confusion we have to address in education is the difference between higher standards and higher scores on standardized tests. In her book *Safe To Be Smart*, Anne Wheelock reminds us that these are not the same thing. She offers some ideas on how we might incorporate the call for higher standards into a humane approach to the middle school. Her focus is on three key notions, which she lays out briefly here for *Focus on Middle School* readers: centering our attention on student work, establishing an environment that motivates and nurtures the learners, and building a culture of collaboration among the professionals in the school.

Given the current pressure to reach standards, it is crucial that educators develop the capacity to influence their communities and to help others understand the limitations of viewing standards merely as standardized test scores. Wheelock's book and the brief article reprinted here are one step toward an understanding of standards that can enhance learning rather than derail it.

—D.L.K.

understanding involves using knowledge for in-depth inquiry, problem solving, and communication of new learning. In this context, teachers do not categorize students as smart merely because they have posted a particular grade point average or have met certain cutoff scores on standardized tests. Nor do they define students as smart because they have the quick answer, get it right the first time, or even if they always have the correct answer. In contrast, school cultures that support standards-based reform define being smart in terms of students' willingness to take risks, make mistakes, and ask for help, despite fears that their questions might sound stupid. In schools where it is safe to be smart in this way, students learn to persist in solving difficult problems, even when solutions are not immediately forthcoming.

New Beliefs Require New Practices

If all students are to do work that matches the expectations of new standards, they need school cultures that value accomplishments born of effort rather than based on inherent capabilities. The implications for classrooms are obvious. Teachers can point out, "You must have worked hard at these problems," as a way of fostering students' beliefs that effort, not the fast answer, is what counts. Likewise, teachers can develop assessment practices that teach students to view corrections or negative comments on work as a source of help and information for improving future work, rather than judgments about innate ability.

Teachers can also make it safe to be smart by adopting alternatives to tracking and ability grouping. Teachers who do this know that no matter what they say about persistence, students will not put forth the effort necessary to do good work as long as schools sort them according to perceived ability. Heterogeneous grouping is essential if students are to learn multiple modes of creating good work. Heterogeneous grouping and the norms, routines, and relationships that make the most of student diversity allow students to

grapple with the complexities of divergent thinking and to expand their own definitions of being smart.

A Focus on Student Work

Putting student work at the center of learning is a key step in building a culture of high standards. In schools that make it safe for all students to be smart, student work itself—not lists of discrete facts to be mastered or cutoff scores on standardized tests—is the standard of accomplishment. In fact, teachers who focus daily on helping students produce better work that meets higher standards of quality understand that test scores have little connection to the quality of student work. Middle school teachers around the country are increasingly adopting a set of routines that result in students producing work that meets standards. These teachers know that student work of high quality requires assignments that orient students toward the learning for understanding anticipated by the standards of the professional associations. They also know that students will strive to create work of high quality when they know that "real world" audiences will actually use their work. Teacher Ron Adams in Quincy, Massachusetts, sees the effort when his students prepare testimony to submit to the United States Congress that is based on the students' study of international child labor conditions. In Kathy Greeley's class in Cambridge, Massachusetts, students write and illustrate books that will be used by the school's younger students. In Shutesbury, Massachusetts, Ron Berger's students may prepare a study of the town's water quality for their community's planning board. Helping students do high-quality work in relation to challenging assignments means reorganizing classrooms for maximum learning. In these classrooms:

In schools that make it safe for all students to be smart, student work itself–not lists of discrete facts to be mastered or cutoff scores on standardized tests– is the standard of accomplishment.

- Students use and develop rubrics that describe work that is good and excellent. Teachers make sure that all students have a chance to view samples of work that exemplify excellence in their field—science, journalism, construction—so that students can see for themselves the standards of quality they are aiming to achieve.
- Students understand that a first draft is only the beginning step in a process of improvement. Teachers instruct students in the skills of giving feedback to support peer critique and discussion about the work. All students have time and guidance for revision of the work so that it meets the expectations for high quality.
- Student-led conferences give students the opportunity to engage in a process of self-

assessment, and to articulate learning strengths, interests, and weaknesses.

- Students complete exit projects that meet standards of the rubrics as part of their transition from the school.
- Students present the results of their projects (for example, an analysis of water quality, a report on community voting patterns over several decades, or their own illustrated chapter books) to an audience that will use their work in the real world.

Teachers who focus daily on helping students produce better work that meets higher standards of quality understand that test scores have little connection to the quality of student work.

Middle schools increasingly adopt these practices as a way to let student work, not test scores, reflect the value they place on high standards. Such reform organizations as the Coalition of Essential Schools, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, and the ATLAS project (see Resources on page 6) aid in this movement by offering technical assistance and networking links to like-minded schools that share a commitment to in-depth learning, even when that means covering fewer topics in the curriculum.

Caring Relationships

School cultures that make it safe to be smart create a climate of respect and caring, where racism and sexism do not violate a student's integrity and sense of self. If a focus on student work reflects what Theodore Sizer calls "caring rigor," then it is in respectful personal relationships that students find the rigorous caring that will motivate them to do their best work, persist through difficulties, and revise work to meet standards. Establishing a motivational climate based on these relationships is a second step toward building a culture for high standards.

A number of structures that facilitate consistent and caring relationships are familiar to well-developed middle schools. They include:

- Teaming and looping, so that a small group of teachers remain with the same group of students over several years.
- Teacher advisories that ensure that all students have at least one adult who knows them well.
- Smaller schools, or schools-within-schools, that allow teachers to know and discuss student work from a group of students whose learning styles they know well.

But smallness is not the only condition necessary for developing caring relationships that make it safe to be smart. If students are to take risks and value effort, they need to know that they will be given second chances and extra help to improve their work. Schools that foster a culture of high standards make it possible for students to receive extra help early and often. Students receive such assistance when they need it, rather than at the end of the year, when their failure is certain.

continued on page 6 . . .

Teachers who focus daily on helping students produce better work that meets higher standards of quality understand that test scores have little connection to the quality of student work.

United States 8th-Graders Above International Average in Math, Science

According to the Third International Mathematics and Science Study-Repeat (TIMSS-R), compared with students in 37 other participating nations, U.S. 8th-graders are above the international average in mathematics and science performance.

"Our students are successfully learning more math and science every year they're in school," said former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, "but we can do even better. For example, the Glenn Commission gave us some very significant, bold steps we can take in the teaching of math and science from elementary through high school, ranging from improving the professional development of K-12 teachers, to widening the pipeline of people going into math and science teaching, to retaining those teachers once we get them in the pipeline."

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the results of this study in December in a report titled *Pursuing Excellence: Comparisons of International Eighth-Grade Mathematics and Science Achievement from a U.S. Perspective, 1995 and 1999*. The study, sponsored by the NCES and the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the United States and by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), assessed 8th-graders' knowledge of mathematics and science in 38 nations. It follows up on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study conducted in 1995.

In 1999, for mathematics, U.S. students performed better than the international average in fractions and numbers sense; data representation, analysis, and probability; and algebra. They performed at the international average in measurement and geometry. In science, the average score of U.S. 8th-graders was higher than the international average in earth science; life science; chemistry; environmental and resource issues; and scientific inquiry and the nature of science. U.S. 8th-graders performed at the international average in physics. The performance of U.S. 8th-graders in mathematics and science was about the same in 1999 and in 1995.

Because its predecessor study—TIMSS—reported on 4th-graders, TIMSS-R offers a unique opportunity to compare the performance of 4th-graders in 1995 with the performance of 8th-graders in 1999. The results indicate that the relative performance for 8th-grade students in mathematics and science was lower in TIMSS-R (1999) than it was for 4th-grade students four years earlier in TIMSS (1995).

"This finding validates the results of the previous 1995 study that after the 4th grade, students in the United States fall behind their international peers as they pass through the school system," notes Dr. Gary Phillips, acting commissioner of education statistics. "The lack of improvement is consistent with findings from recent administration of the Long Term Trend assessment from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. However, over a much longer time span there have been improvements in the U.S. in both math and science." Riley added that four years may not be enough time to register the effectiveness of education reforms.

Copies of the TIMSS-R results are available on request and on the NCES Web site at http://nces.ed.gov/timss. For general information on TIMSS and TIMSS-R, please visit the NCES Web site, contact the TIMSS customer service number at 202-502-7421, or send E-mail to timss@ed.gov.

. . . *continued from page 4*

A Collegial Professional Culture

Teachers who believe that all students can do work that meets high standards, and who put into practice routines and relationships grounded in that belief, go a long way toward creating a culture in which it is safe to be smart. But those beliefs do not emerge by magic. They require a common understanding of what high-quality teaching and learning look like.

Regular, sustained opportunities to discuss the work students do in light of teaching goals and curriculum is essential to developing a schoolwide, shared definition of high standards that teachers can communicate to students. Such discussions can reveal how different learning opportunities and expectations vary from classroom to classroom. As teachers use student work to stimulate conversations about assignments, classroom interactions, and expectations for individual students, discussions begin to unearth controversy and reveal differences in perspectives among adults in a school. As Kathe Jervis and Joe McDonald of the Coalition of Essential Schools point out, it is at this point that teacher discussions become "countercultural"—capable of shaking up entrenched assumptions about what students can learn and do.

If schools are to realize the promises of the standards movement, they need a vision for standards-based reform powerful enough to create a school culture that values student work of high quality and establishes routines that make it possible for all students to produce such work. They need a motivational climate, based on caring relationships, that communicates the possibilities of doing high-quality work to all students. Grounded in new habits, relationships, and beliefs about what it means to be smart, a culture of high standards is within reach of all middle schools. In its absence, all the rhetoric of high standards will mean little for the learning of our young adolescent students.

This article draws from Anne Wheelock's 1998 book *Safe To Be Smart: Building a Culture for Standards-Based Reform in the Middle Grades*, published by the National Middle School Association.

Anne Wheelock is a Boston-based independent education policy analyst; her writing about schools focuses on practices that promote both excellence and equity, especially in the middle grades.

Resources

Coalition of Essential Schools, Oakland, California
http://www.essentialschools.org

Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Cambridge, Massachusetts
617-576-1260; http://www.elob.org

ATLAS (Authentic Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for All Students), Education Development Center, Newton, Massachusetts
617-969-7100; http://www.edc.org/FSC/ATLAS

social curriculum in action: learning to take care of ourselves and others

Treat others like you want to be treated. Mind your own business. What part of that is my problem? These thoughts raced through Mrs. Regent's mind when some 5th-grade students hurried to her side after lunch one day exclaiming that they needed to "discuss cafeteria." They reported that their lunch break had become very stressful because some students were "rude, noisy, and gross." The students wondered if cafeteria could be the topic for their class meeting that week. Mrs. Regent agreed to help them develop an agenda about the problems.

The students knew that they first needed to state their problem and then develop a plan to resolve it. Initially, these two steps seemed to encompass the entire process, so they wrote "cafeteria problem" and "solution to cafeteria problem" on the board as the meeting agenda. Reflecting on the modeling, role-playing, and practicing that she had implemented at the beginning of the year, Mrs. Regent knew she would need to facilitate a potentially long-term, authentic problem-solving situation. For the meeting to be effective, the students would need to follow the "steps for problem-solving" as presented by Ruth Charney (1999):

- Introduce the problem and review the rules
- Gather information
- Begin discussion
- Propose solutions
- Choose a solution
- Choose a consequence
- Close the meeting. (p. 80)

Before the meeting, Mrs. Regent went over her plans to expand the cafeteria discussions with a review of the healthful lifestyle curriculum. She reviewed her journal entries and lesson plans and reviewed important information about the children's health issues, family values, and lifestyles. For instance, she knew that Corinne's family raised organic vegetables and did not eat meat. Arthur's father owned a slaughterhouse where many local hunters took their deer to be dressed. Ronnie was diabetic and always had an emergency snack ready, but Elizabeth wanted to be a model and so avoided sitting near Ronnie. Some of the children knew this personal information about their friends, but Mrs. Regent knew it was her responsibility to keep confidential information shared only in family conferences. Thus, she knew she had to closely monitor class-meeting procedures to protect privacy.

Students were eager to begin the meeting the next day. Susan, the student leader of the week, asked the others to bring their chairs to the meeting circle. She told the class members that they were going to gather information about cafeteria problems by taking turns around the circle, telling one thing about cafeteria problems or passing if they had no concerns. Mrs. Regent served as board recorder so she could reflect students' concerns, but at the same time model polite and considerate language. After each of the students had responded, the timekeeper called for closure. The students realized that the cafeteria problem was more serious than initially thought. Susan asked what they should do next; Arthur suggested that they group the problems and brainstorm solutions. Upon Mrs. Regent's suggestion, the class agreed that there were three main problems: loud talking, rude comments about other people's food, and inappropriate table manners. The students asked if Miss Karn's class could join them to discuss solutions because they sat near each other in the cafeteria. Mrs. Regent agreed to check with Miss Karn to arrange a large meeting, then complimented the class for giving such thoughtful attention to the others during the meeting. Susan adjourned the meeting.

The two teachers agreed that their classes could work together on solutions to these problems that were making many students feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in the cafeteria. Seemingly small, social problems during lunch had spilled over into the classroom, and had taken students' attention away from academic choices. The teachers believed these problems could be solved if they asked questions that would guide students toward making a reasonable plan.

The students' combined class discussion led to several possible solutions. The most popular solution was to have ambassador teams visit each of the other 5th-grade groups during their class meeting times. Each team made posters that refocused cafeteria rules into categories of polite conversation, good table manners that would demonstrate respect for oneself, and kind manners that avoided prejudice and showed respect to others. The students also decided that consequences of ignoring solutions proposed by ambassadors would lead to peer mediation. Students and teachers agreed that their solution worked. The students believed they had "done something" to make lunch relaxing and fun. The teachers found that the students returned from lunch each day ready to focus on academic choices.

This entire scenario may seem ideal to you. Realistically, class meetings last for about 30 minutes and the teacher facilitates in order to keep the process active and fair, with no negative "put-downs." Trying one solution does not always solve problems, but the meetings can be invaluable because students learn social and academic skills in the process of problem solving, and meet many state standards within the meeting format. A great deal of teaching precedes a meeting, continues during the meeting, and extends beyond the meeting. Many teachers have been trained in The Responsive Classroom approach to teaching and learning from the Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC). You may learn more about the organization by visiting its Web site, www.responsiveclassroom.org, or by writing to: Northeast Foundation for Children, 71 Montague City Rd., Greenfield, MA 01301.

Cordially,

—Jeanie Burnett (burnett@kutztown.edu),
Vice President for Intermediate/Middle Childhood

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Call for Manuscripts

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A Quarterly Newsletter for the Education Community

Theme

Gordon F. Vars has advocated for student-centered middle level education for decades. Drawing from his extensive research and experience, Vars offers us an important focus for our reflection on standards in our schools. His research has helped educators understand that involving students in the planning of curriculum does not damage learning—in fact, just the opposite is true. Our learners can prosper when they are active creators of the learning experience.

In a climate where so many voices call for students and teachers to be accountable for learning, as measured on standardized tests, it's a delight to hear a voice calling for us to help students be engaged in learning.

—D.K.

On Standards, Standardization, and Student Engagement

Gordon F. Vars,
Professor Emeritus
Kent State University

Standards! How do you deal with them in your classroom, school, or district? Do you view them as helpful guides to what your students need to know and be able to do? Or do you see them as an attempt to "standardize" education, imposing uniformity on the curriculum without regard to differences in students, schools, and communities? And what happens to the needs, problems, and concerns of students when we become preoccupied with raising students' scores on standards-based, state-mandated, high-stakes tests? Opinions about standards and how they should be used have become polarized in recent years. Indeed, the word "standards" has become so politicized today that it might be better if we stopped using it!

A case in point is the article by Anne Wheelock, "Building a Culture of High Standards in the Middle Grades," published in the Spring 2001 issue of *Focus on Middle School*. The article reiterates some of the main points made in her 1998 book *Safe To Be Smart: Building a Culture for Standards-Based Reform in the Middle Grades*. Considering how some politicians use the phrase "standards-based reform," one could easily jump to the conclusion that Wheelock supports the standardization of teaching and learning.

On the contrary, Wheelock's picture of a school characterized by a "culture of high standards" is one in which all students can become successful learners. In other words, standards are

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viewed as goals or guidelines, not uniform minimum expectations. In a recent letter she reaffirmed that she did not mean to imply "that all students would look alike at the end of the day or year or decade they spend in school. The 'standards' I talked about are embodied in the exemplars from the real world . . . rather than derived from a district, state, or federal level" (February 15, 2001). This is a far cry from the obsessive test-prep environment in some standards/test-driven schools and classrooms today.

The Standards Movement

Efforts to use standards as a tool for imposing standardization have intensified in the years since Wheelock's book was published. At that time, she asked if schools could "extricate themselves from the oppressive top-down models of control and standardization inherent in the use of standards for grade retention and bureaucratic accountability." She was cautiously hopeful then. She described the "caring relationships" and "collegial professional culture" that characterize a school in which it is "safe to be smart." The book is enriched by countless examples of schools and teachers who were responding positively to the challenge of standards. In many respects, Wheelock's recommendations parallel those of the National Middle School Association's position paper *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (NMSA, 1995).

Unfortunately, today the phrase "high standards" usually implies that every student is expected to reach the same standards. Failure is the inevitable consequence for students, teachers, schools, and even whole school systems when "high standards" are applied across the board without regard to individual differences. Consider these excerpts from letters I recently received from wise and experienced educational consultants in two different states:

1. They have 115 kids in the middle school and 34 have failed two or more classes for the year. . . . The teachers want to develop a punitive retention plan, but I refuse to help them with that. After interviewing the kids and spending a few days in the building, I think there needs to be lots of work on who the kids are and what strategies we should use to teach them.
2. There's an incredible amount of anger and embarrassment in the 54 schools . . . [mostly those] with low income and minority students . . . listed as failing. . . . We worry that the listing will continue and hurt the most vulnerable schools and students.

Of course, society has every right to define what it wants students to know and be able to do. But when standards as "goals" are misconstrued as "mandated minimum performance" for all, gross injustice is done to those who, for whatever reason, cannot "make the cut." Nancy S. Grasmick (2001) reminds us that in doing this we are in danger of repeating the same mistake that scuttled the "minimum competency movement" 25 years ago. As she puts it, "We abandoned the push for higher standards because we allowed sanctions to get out ahead of the hard work of intervening to make sure that teachers and students were prepared to meet them." She calls this "a mistake we can't repeat," but, of course, we are!

"One Size Fits Few"

This phrase, which Susan Ohanian used as the title of her 1999 book, bluntly reminds us of the folly of educational standards when interpreted as minimum requirements. Alfie Kohn (1998), another outspoken critic of the standards movement, points out that this approach is an improper application of an industrial metaphor to the field of education. Unfortunately, Wheelock used this metaphor in her *Focus* article and in her 1998 book. The industrial metaphor is most evident in Wheelock's recommendation that we "focus on student work." The word "work" is used more than 30 times in her brief article in *Focus*, and she devotes 60 pages to that idea in her book.

Kohn would have us stop referring to what students do in school as work. He says, "In effect, we are equating what children do to figure things out with what adults do in offices and factories to earn money" (p. 210). In contrast to businesses, where the focus is on salable identical products and "the bottom line," the things that students produce are "by-products of the act of making meaning. The process of learning is more impor-

tant than the products that result," according to Kohn (p. 211).

Of course, the only way to determine if students have learned something is to observe what they do, to look for "behavioral clues," as George Harrison puts it. But preoccupation with student "output," like preoccupation with test scores, may draw attention away from the widely varying human beings whose learning is being considered. Even when students help to establish the criteria or rubrics by which their work will be evaluated, the very fact that all students are to be judged by the same criteria flies in the face of individual differences. Carl Glickman (2001) has pointed out that it is this "standardization," not the standards themselves, that poses a dire threat to democratic ideals.

Even when students help to establish the criteria or rubrics by which their work will be evaluated, the very fact that all students are to be judged by the same criteria flies in the face of individual differences.

Alfie Kohn also cautions against adopting the false dichotomy that if something is not "work" it must be "play." In his words:

> Learning is a third alternative, where the primary purpose is neither playlike enjoyment (although the process can be deeply satisfying) nor the worklike completion of error-free products (although the process can involve intense effort and concentration). To challenge the work metaphor is not to abandon rigor or excellence. Rather it is to insist that work is not the only activity that can be pursued rigorously—and play, for that matter, is not the only activity that can be experienced as pleasurable. (p. 213)

Do Students Want To Be Smart?

Wheelock urges schools to become places where it is "safe to be smart." Some may question whether students want to "be smart." Suppose a student would rather be "cool"? This is especially likely in the middle school years, when peer approval assumes such great importance. Too often these days, this appears to be more a matter of the clothes they wear, the color of their hair, or their body parts that have been pierced, rather than intellectual accomplishment.

It is primarily the parents and educators who want students to be willing "to take risks, make mistakes, and ask for help, despite fears that their questions might sound stupid." Students will not do this unless they trust the people around them and are genuinely concerned about the problem or issue being examined. In other words, adult expectations will be ignored unless students are genuinely engaged in the learning process. Even knowing that "real world audiences will actually use" whatever they produce will hardly motivate students who could not care less about the outcome.

Wheelock responds that "lots" of students do care about being smart. Recently, she has been interviewing many students and reviewing their portfolios. She writes:

> They treat school very seriously. Being cool with their friends is good, too. And some are learning they can be

both. I don't see these as opposites. . . . In fact, one point I'd hoped to convey in the book is that schools can play a positive role in establishing the norm that being cool and being smart are two sides of the same coin. Kids . . . develop an "academic identity" and a sense of academic competence depending in part on what their schools do to help them. Of course, this is also what detracking is about. In detracked schools, kids don't have to choose between a "cool" persona and a "smart" persona. (February 15, 2001)

Developing a Culture of High Student Engagement

Whatever persona they may assume, students must see that learning is meaningful to them before they will invest themselves in the learning process. For decades, middle level educators have asserted that education should address student needs, problems, and concerns, not just adult expectations. This is an essential element of a "developmentally appropriate middle level school" as described in the National Middle School Association's *This We Believe* statement (1995). Schools can confront students with standards, but if they see little value in meeting them, little learning will occur. How can we get them to "buy into" the process?

Student Concerns and Standards, Too

It has been demonstrated over many decades that one of the best ways to engage students is to involve them directly in helping to establish class and individual goals, define curriculum, select learning activities, and establish criteria for assessment. This process was called "teacher-pupil planning" when described by Giles way back in 1941 and by Parrish and Waskin in 1958. Miel (1952) used the phrase "cooperative procedures in learning," and James Beane (1997), its most vigorous advocate today, refers to it as "collaborative planning." By whatever name, inviting students to help shape their own learning experiences in school epitomizes the "respect for the worth and dignity of each person" that is one of the hallmarks of democracy. At the very least, this fundamental value mandates that "those who will be affected by a decision must participate in making that decision."

Might this approach result in a curriculum focused on trivial matters? Not if students are sincerely invited to share their genuine concerns by adults whom they trust and if their privacy is respected in the process. Anonymous surveys of almost 500 Wisconsin middle level students revealed a wide array of concerns (McDonough, 1991). Of course, many of their responses reflected typical young adolescent anxiety about physical changes and their relations with peers, family members, and the school. Yet they also revealed deep concern about issues that bedevil adult society, such as war and peace, the environment, fairness and justice, prejudice, and the future. When Mee (1997) surveyed 2,000 students in grades 5 through 8, she found that their worries followed a similar pattern, from "getting bad grades" to "pollution" to "World War III."

Establishing Priorities

Teacher-student planning is a means of meeting the dual obligations assumed by every educator: to help students in their efforts to meet adult-determined standards and, at the same time, to enable them to address their individual needs, problems, and concerns. But first we must be realistic in what we expect of ourselves and our students. It is impossible to ensure that all students will master all of the standards that have been proposed. Robert Marzano and associates at McREL have documented the utter futility of trying to teach all of the standards set forth by professional associations and other groups. They concluded:

> A high school diploma would require as much classroom time as has historically resulted in a master's or professional degree. Even the brightest students would need nine additional years of schooling to master the nearly 4,000 benchmarks experts have set in 14 subject areas. (Marzano, Kendall, & Gaddy, 1999).

Schools have always had too much to teach, so it is no surprise that it is necessary to be selective. It may seem presumptuous for teachers to select and prioritize subject matter standards that have been recommended by experts in prestigious national organizations and sanctioned by state departments of education. But, as Nel Noddings reminds us, subject matter specialists are bound to

recommend too much because "they cannot control their passions" (1999). Besides, who is better qualified to design curriculum than those who are closest to the young people being served—teachers, parents, and, of course, the students themselves.

Curriculum Planning

When state and national standards are viewed as guidelines, not absolutes, then it is perfectly appropriate for local curriculum committees to adapt those guidelines to suite local conditions, making sure to allow schools, teams, and individual teachers to make further adaptations to fit specific students. Procedures for building curriculum around preplanned, but open-ended, instructional units, sometimes called "resource units," were refined years ago. Most often recommended to give some structure to integrative curriculum, the process is equally suitable in any subject area (Van Til et al., 1961, 1967; Vars, 2000, in press). Further fine-tuning of these guidelines then takes place in each school as teams or individual teachers brainstorm specific instructional units that address standards and that also seem likely to be meaningful to the students in their current classes. But even these "tailor-made" units may not generate much enthusiasm if merely presented to the students.

> *Teachers first must find out who their students are as persons, and what needs, problems, and concerns are uppermost in their minds.*

Instead, teachers first must find out who their students are as persons, and what needs, problems, and concerns are uppermost in their minds. Of course, a reasonable level of trust must be established before students will share their concerns and aspirations with either peers or teachers. Small group discussions can then lay the groundwork for identification of the most-prevalent questions and concerns in a class or team. These should be posted in the classroom, along with the major standards to be addressed during the year.

When students understand which standards are to be met during any particular year, they can suggest many creative ways to address them. Posting both lists reminds everyone that their task is to cooperatively plan learning experiences that deal with students' major concerns and also address mandated standards. The lists should be revisited from time to time during the year, both to check on progress and to adjust for changes that take place in the students, the teachers, and the world.

Some teachers or teams then move directly into the unit-planning stage, building the units around students' major personal and social concerns (Alexander, Carr, & McAvoy, 1995; Pate, Homestead, & McGinnis, 1997). Others share the tentative unit plans developed by the teacher or team and invite the students to help identify ways the unit may be modified to incorporate student concerns. In either case, the final curriculum design evolves through democratic negotiation by teachers and students, seeking a balanced attention to adult expectations and student concerns. Above all, teachers must be sincere in inviting students to help design a course, unit, or learning experience. This is the key to developing "a culture of high student engagement."

Of course, the time spent cooperatively designing these learning experiences will inevitably reduce the amount of content that is merely "covered." Instead, students who are genuinely engaged in learning will gain depth of knowledge, refine their learning tools, and develop the higher-order thinking skills that too often are slighted in

this era of high-stakes testing. Student effort and motivation are greatly enhanced when they realize they have a say in what is studied and how it is approached.

Conclusion

Anne Wheelock has addressed the challenges confronting all educators today and has suggested that we respond by developing a "culture of high standards." I have pointed out the ambiguity of the word "standard" and how its use may reinforce application of the "industrial metaphor" to education. I propose, instead, that we develop "a culture of high student engagement." We can do this by involving students more directly in shaping the learning process. We should tap into their concerns and invite them to help us design curriculum that is both meaningful to them and that meets important societal expectations. This shows students that their ideas are valued, thereby demonstrating a key principle of democracy, and it helps students to see that education is a matter of serious concern for our entire society.

Above all, in dealing with standards we must not lose sight of an even greater challenge: To cultivate in all students a deep commitment to democracy and to a lifetime of learning. Preoccupation with standards and with passing "the test" may seriously undermine our efforts to achieve these noble purposes. Students are human beings and must not be treated like "widgets" coming off an assembly line!

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knowledge is the key to understanding adolescents: providing guidelines for parents

At the 2001 ACEI Annual International Conference and Exhibition in Toronto, the Intermediate/Middle Childhood Committee sponsored a special session. During this interesting and informative presentation, panelists Jill C. Hunter, Linda Matwichuk, and Kathy Olthof shared information related to using knowledge of intermediate and middle childhood students (ages 9-15) to foster more positive parent-child relationships and promote collaboration among teachers and parents.

Parents often describe adolescence as an extremely stressful and tension-filled period. Since adolescent-parent relationships are major factors in determining smooth transitions from preteen to teen to adult, any knowledge that educators can share to help parents better understand their children is very valuable. Parental education about physical, cognitive, and social characteristics that are unique to this stage of development could lead to more positive relationships between parents and adolescents, and contribute to adolescent school success.

Sensitive educators can provide facts about physical changes during this period, with an emphasis upon diversity in development and growth rates. The adults can help ease young adolescents' transition by answering questions directly, and reassuring them that their growth will balance out. Thus, when they reach adulthood, they won't go through life tripping over their "gargantuan" feet and landing on their "catcher-mitt" hands. Parental involvement in sensitive discussions about physical changes can lead to increased security for adolescents.

Teachers need to be aware of, and alert parents to, community support that is available for adolescents and their families in order to keep students socially, emotionally, and physically safe. It is important to help parents be aware of when their children are getting into dangerous situations. Linda Matwichuk suggests that the best advice to give parents is to spend time with adolescents and maintain open dialogues. They also can watch for abrupt or marked changes in academic performance or social activities.

What do adolescents consider to be the ideal parent? Jill Hunter found that children want parents who are happy people with good dispositions and a sense of humor. They want parents to create a happy home and set a good example. Young adolescents express a desire for their families to support their extracurricular activities.

Young Adolescents Say . . .

We want adults to:
- Listen to us and try to understand what we mean
- Treat us like grown-ups
- Accept us as we are, faults and all
- Trust us and expect our best
- Treat our friends with respect
- Guide us, love us, and let us *know* that they love us.

The working parent with 19 loads of laundry a week and daily trips to the grocery store gets tired. When confronted with a child's demand for undivided attention, the parent may overreact and snap, "I hear with my ears and listen with my brain—keep talking, I am listening!" So with all respect to busy parents, the following suggestions are offered:

- Listen empathetically, without judging; avoid overreacting; give undivided attention
- Be a coach rather than a judge; avoid nagging and lecturing; remain calm during discussions
- Offer choices of acceptable alternatives; problem-solve together; rotate family chores
- Develop mutual trust and respect; ask for adolescent's opinion and help often
- Keep sense of humor; use deserved praise; focus on positive actions
- Build family traditions; make regular photo album dates and family meetings
- Be available; have family meals; invite adolescent's friends for family meals
- Plan vacations together; involve grandparents when possible; tell family stories.

Parents must face the fact that they need to "let go" as their children struggle toward adulthood. Remember, however, that the butterfly cut free of the cocoon too soon will not survive. Young adolescents who are supported in safe environments by loving and caring adults can risk learning to apply strategies that will free them to be active participants in meaningful communities.

—Cordially, Jeanie Burnett
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Vice President for Intermediate/Middle Childhood

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